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**A Legacy of Peaceful Coexistence: Historico-Political and
Economic Perspectives of Nigeria-Benin Relations**

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Abstract

Long before colonization of Africa, there were extensive contacts and mutual interactions between various African peoples and societies. Colonialism and colonial domination in such societies affected their interactions due to the creation of international borders and boundaries by colonial powers. Thus, heterogeneous and homogenous societies and communities were forcibly divided into various European countries' spheres of influence. The people at this period had many things in common and were linked together by internal trade route, geographical influence and thus simply lived in peace with one another. This paper examined the relations between Nigeria and Benin Republic in various aspects of life before and after colonialism. The paper discovered that historical, cultural and economic relations between the two countries predate colonialism and this is due to the belief by the people that they are one and belong to same ancestor. The paper put forward some recommendations as a means of enhancing the age long relationship between the two countries, which include establishment of joint institutions in the area of education, health, economic and culture to sustain not only the relationship but also to preserve the rich culture of the people.

Introduction

Long before colonization of Africa, there were extensive contacts and mutual interactions between various African peoples and societies. Colonialism and colonial domination in such societies affected their interactions due to the creation of international borders and boundaries by colonial powers. Thus, heterogeneous and homogenous societies and communities were forcibly divided into various European countries' spheres of influence. The people at this period had many things in common and were linked together by internal trade route, geographical influence and thus simply lived in peace with one another. The partition led to the balkanization of African states and society and the disintegration of their corporate existence through arbitrary demarcation of territories which separated people of the same race or tribe from one another as well as transferred them to different societies (Rasaki 1991). Nigeria and Benin Republic were among African countries affected by this colonial division.

The creation of artificial boundaries by the colonialist led to the emergence of new countries under one colonial power or the other. For example, Nigeria and Benin were among such new countries. The people who found themselves in the former became the subject of British Empire, while those in the latter under French rule. Nigeria and Benin have longstanding bilateral relations despite the fact that the countries were ruled by different colonial powers. This is due to the fact that the two countries share many things in common and there were extensive contacts and cultural relations between various people stretching from old Oyo Empire as far as Ougadougou in Burkinafaso (Akhigbe 1991). For example, in 1730 Agaja of Dahomey (now Benin Republic) sent his ambassadors with large presents of coral together with one of his handsome daughter to the Alafin of Oyo. In return, the Alafin also sent one of his daughters as wife for Agaja. This was an expression of good neighbourliness (*This Day Newspaper* 11 October 1999). It is obvious from the foregone, that Nigeria-Benin relations predate colonialism. It is on this basis that the paper tries to provide an overview of the relations between the government and people of the two states. Focusing on aspects such as historical, socio-cultural, economic, political and other aspects of the relations.

Historical Relations

It is clearly on record that Africa was a peaceful continent before the advent of colonialism. The people at that period had many things in common and were linked together by internal trade route; geographical influence was a major factor in the distribution of occupations, the location of industries and interstate markets. The people respect their rulers and thus live in peace with one another (Rasaki, 1991). Nigeria and Benin had a long history of interaction, spanning all areas of human endeavour. The communities' trade with one another in farm produce and handcraft, inter-marriage was not uncommon while mutual participation in cultural festivals, religious ceremonies formed integral part of their relations (Oyebode, 1991). According to Asobele (2003)

Beninois people migrated from the Aja state of Southwest Nigeria in the 15th century and settled in Abomy and Porto-Novo. These people were originally of Yoruba stock. But on arrival, the settlers began to evolve a peculiar character and language. By 1625 a kingdom was formed out of the much chiefdom and under king Dako was named Dahomey.

The historical and cordial relations between the two countries was demonstrated in 1730 when Agaja of Dahomey (now Benin Republic) sent his ambassadors with large presents of coral together with one of his handsomest daughter to the Alafin of Oyo. In return, the Alafin also sent one of his daughters as a wife for Agaja. This was an expression of peace-making, good neighbourliness and Africanity (*This Day* 11 October, 1999).

According to Akhigbe (1991), before the balkanization of the continent in 19th century, there were extensive contacts and cultural relations between various people stretching from the Old Oyo Empire westward up to Quagadugu in Burkina Faso. The colonial arrangement that arose from the balkanization gave sovereignty to Nation-states to what used to be homogeneous physical, cultural and geographical entities. The Nigeria and Benin border demarcation was not an exception of this rule. The present distribution of Yoruba groups on both sides of Nigeria-Benin border is the result of colonial partition of 1885. The partition broke into pieces' former kingdoms and shared them between France and Britain, creating in the process a border or barrier where one never existed (Somouni 1991).

Ajomo (1991) described Nigeria-Benin boundary like many parts of Africa as a legacy of colonial imposition. Benin (formerly Dahomey) is one of the Nigeria's contiguous neighbouring Francophone states. On attainment of independence of the two countries in 1960s, the boundary became Nigeria-Dahomey international boundary and later Nigeria – Benin boundary and divided people of same social and cultural background. The traditional rulers have always refused to accept this situation and recent events show that they will continue to do so. For instance, in 1982, the Onisabe of Sabe and Alaketu of Ketu all of Benin Republic were invited by the Ooni of Ife as the chairman of Oyo state council of Obas in Nigeria. The two Beninese traditional rulers were given opportunity to take part in council deliberations in the country other than theirs. Also in 1983, the Ooni paid a royal visit to Alaketu in Benin (Somouni, 1991). It is a well-known fact that Yoruba speaking people who are of Ogun and Oyo state in Nigeria are also found in border areas of Benin Republic (Omemben, 1991). The historical linkages between the traditional rulers of the two countries have over the years evolved and maintained an informal system of agreement to assist each other and their subjects in various social and cultural areas (Dahiru, 2003).

In fact, even up to the present day, the Emir of Borgu's consent is always sought before appointment of king of Nikki kingdom in the republic of Benin. So also, Babanna and

Gbaso communities of Nigeria and Benin republic continued with their interaction to the extent that it does not matter from which of the communities the ruler of the communities emerged. In other words, a candidate from Babanna (Nigeria) can emerge as ruler of Gbaso (Benin). This is possible because of the believe that the two communities are same in spite of colonial division.

Politically, the relations between the two states existed even before colonial era. Such relations existed among political leaders of the area. For instance, in 1730 the Agaja of Dahomey (now Benin Republic) sent his ambassadors with large present of coral together with of his handsomest daughter to the Alafin of Oyo. In return, the Alafin also sent one of his daughters as a wife for Agaja (This Day newspaper 11/10/1997). The above no doubt, demonstrates good neighbourliness relation between the leaders during the pre-colonial era. At independence, the foreign policy priority of Benin Republic was turned towards France and French-speaking West and Central African states with which it still maintains institutionalized bilateral and multilateral linkages. Nigeria likewise turned its attention to Britain and Commonwealth of nations, (Dahiru, 2003). The consequence of this is that Nigeria and Benin maintain awkward political distance despite their territorial proximity and some level of cultural affinity. The formal diplomatic mission between the two countries began when Nigeria broke diplomatic relations with France in early 1960s and banned France aircraft and ships from its territories; Benin was adversely affected because it depended on Nigerian port at Lagos for the reception of equipment needed for the construction of Cotonou harbour. It was the solicitation from Benin, Niger and Chad which made Nigeria to lift the embargo on French aircraft and ships few weeks later (Dahiru, 2003).

Nigeria and Benin concentrated attention on moves towards formal regulation of trans-border movement of their respective population. This was later followed by a Visa abolition agreement. In recognition of good neighbourliness in enhancing security, Benin was the first country with which Nigeria signed its first friendship treaty at the end of the civil war (Oyebode, 1991). The political and traditional leaders of both states also engaged in official visit like the visit by Onisabe of Sabe and Alaketu of Ketu (Benin Republic) to Ife on the invitation of Ooni of Ife, (Soumoni, 1991). Also in 1975 General Gowon visited Benin in effort to improve relations between Nigeria and her neighbour and observed:

We attach to the relations between our two countries that geography, history, culture and family ties, have inextricably bound together from the very beginning of time. Happily, for our government and people the relations have always been close, solid and fraternal. It should not and could not be otherwise, since our people have been communicating trading, cooperating, co-existing and inter-marrying from time immemorial.

He concluded that Nigeria and Benin were guided by same foreign policy principles: friendship and cooperation with all countries, respect for sovereign equality of all nations irrespective of size, population and explained that the two countries always adopt the same position in the United Nations organisation (UNO, the Non-Alignment Movement and in organisation of Africa Unity (OAU) now AU. The visit of our Political leaders did not end with General Gowon as General Obasonjo also visited Benin Republic in 1978. Also, six months after the inception of General Babangida regime, the Nigeria-Benin border which was closed was formally re-opened. Beninose President, Kereku also visited Nigeria in 1988 at the invitation of General Babangida and resolved after a crucial meeting to reduce bureaucracy to the minimum among the security officials along the borders. They also agreed to establish direct contacts between themselves, their ministers and other officials at all levels.

Recently, in 2011, President Yayi of Benin during a visit to Nigeria described Nigeria as a political and economic pillar to Benin Republic and described the border between the two countries as colonial and artificial which must not be allowed to divide the people and create unnecessary problems. He concluded that the two countries are working towards one and same currency. In the area of military training, agreement was also reached between the two countries where Nigeria agreed to assist in the training of Beninose army officials. This is in line with Nigeria's commitment to respect brotherhood and defence of sovereignty of other African countries (Nigeria Chronicle). In their bid to combat inter-border crimes, the two states set up a joint patrol in 2003. The committee comprised of nine members, five from Nigeria and four from Benin Republic. The move further strengthened the relation between the two countries as Nigeria police handed over 106 trafficked children from Benin to home government, and retrieved 80 stolen vehicles from Benin in like manner (Comet, 15/10/2003).

The cooperation between the two countries did not end at the national level but also extended to states and local levels. For instance, the Prefect of Quene province major Elegbede visited his Ogun state counterpart, Navy Captain Lawal. The two leaders agreed on prompt demolition of illegal border markets to fight the activities of smugglers along Nigeria-Benin border (*Daily times* 11/1/1988). The border communities also share limited facilities provided by governments on the one side of the boundary by kinsmen from other side of the border. For instance, health centre at Imeko in Nigeria provide services for patients including those coming from Ketu and related settlements in Benin republic and vice-versa.

It is imperative for the two states to establish joint institutions to provide services to border communities of the two states, such as unity schools, health centres and border markets.

The above demonstrate the commitment of not only the people but the leaders both political and traditional in the re-integration process of the people divided by colonial

boundary. The ability of the people to tolerate each other in the use of facilities provided by the governments irrespective of which part of the border one belongs to shows that the boundary did not completely erode the feeling of togetherness among the border communities of these two countries. Nigerian communities along Babanna borer in Borgu local government of Niger state heavily rely on health facilities provided by Benin authorities in communities such as Gbaso, Paraku etc. This is so because of the conviction of the people that drugs provided by the Beninoise authority are of high quality.

Socio-Cultural Relations

The fact of historical linkages of the border communities can never be disputed. The people of Badagry division are mainly the Egun-speaking people who have direct cultural affinity with the Aja-speaking people of Benin Republic. The language, culture and traditional administration of the people on either side of the border are identical. The people inter-marry and participate in the same cultural festivals while in some communities, inhabitants live in Nigeria and farm in Benin Republic. And this makes identification of who is a Nigerian from a Beninoise almost impossible (Akhigbe, 1991). The local communities do not bother themselves much with the international boundary because they still regard themselves as one, despite colonial separation. They have common custom, tradition, culture and language. They attend ceremonies and markets on both sides. The people inter-marry across the border, while cross border migration is often to visit kith and kin on the opposite side have continued daily (Kigera III, 1991).

Related to the above, Daku (1991) stresses that the border communities in old Sokoto state such as Kamba, Argungu, etc and their counterparts in Benin and Niger Republics have a common cultural heritage. Their ties date back to the pre-colonial era. This historical link besides fostering trade and inter-marriage facilitated grazing of livestock on either side of the border by both communities who regard themselves as one. The socio-cultural link among the border communities is strengthened through ceremonies. For instance, whenever, a new traditional ruler is turbaned or installed, on either side of the border their counterpart makes it a duty to attend. This cultural relation is also applicable when village heads and district heads are being installed and during visit by government officials of both states (Dahiru, 2003). The socio-cultural relationship between the two states is further fostered by the fact that Yoruba groups occupied the contiguous localities claimed a common origin from Ile-Ife, spoke mutually and intelligible dialects of the same language and possessed similar political, social and religious institutions. Economic links particularly commercial routes and markets, contributes to this cultural uniformity (Somouni, 1991).

In the same vein Adeniran, (2007) explained that the following languages are spoken on both sides of the Nigeria – Benin borderlands. They are Egun, Yoruba, Baatonu

(Bariba), Dendi, Busa (BOKO), Hausa, Fulfulde (Fulani) and Zarma. These languages he posited are qualified to be referred to as trans-national or international languages not merely on the basis of their existence on both sides of the border but because of their transaction. Except at the border post nobody uses the European languages.

The socio-cultural relations between the two countries are clear by the Gun people of Badagry who remained culturally conservative due to contiguous location with the original cultural area in Porto-Novo. The Gun people of Badagry and Port Novo shared common culture such as religion, language socio-political arrangement and even patterns of their settlement (Dioka, 1991). The Yoruba Gun & Bariba ethnic groups are found not only in Benin Republic but also in Nigeria. These groups relate more with each other than with other ethnic groups in their respective countries. For instance, the Alaketu in Republic of Benin is regarded as paramount ruler by all Ketu regardless of what part of the border they fall in. As a matter of fact, the local market in this area especially those of Badagry in Nigeria and Port-Novo, Ajara and Topa (Cotonou) in the Republic of Benin were commonly patronised by all Aja-speaking people regardless of one's side of border (Bimbola, 2002). This is also the case between Borgu, Illo (Nigeria) and Nikki (Benin-Republic) who all claim same ancestor and continued to hold joint annual Gani festival on rotational basis between Borgu and Nikki where the rich culture of the people is show cased. During this period, border security along Babanna town which link the two communities is relaxed to permit free movement of the people

To demonstrate the extent of socio-cultural ties between the two countries in 1978, the former Head of State General Oludegun Obasanjo visited the Republic of Benin in Official capacity and addressed the audience in Yoruba language. He recalls that the historic links which had existed between nationals of the two countries account for why Nigeria place special importance to her relations with the Republic of Benin (Dahiru, 2003). The relationship between the two States did not stop at the socio-cultural relation but extend to economic relations which enable the two States to relate together for the mutual benefit of all.

Economic Relations

The economic relations between Nigeria and Benin Republic flourished even before the coming of European imperialists. For instance, it is normal for Nigerians to sell some consumable items that are not really available to their brothers on the other side of the border. They in turn, sell to Nigerians what they needed most (Alkali, 1991). Related to this Akhigbe, (1991) explained that from time immemorial, the people on our common border had been engaged in legitimate trade among themselves, in addition to common occupation such as farming and fishing.

In the post-independence, both States have signed many treaties and belong to several bilateral and multilateral organisations like the Economic Community of West African

States (ECOWAS), World Trade Organisation (WTO) and Nigerian-Benin Joint Commission for Cooperation. These are in exception of several bilateral and multilateral engagements which are essential to the economic development of both states. For instance, after having reached conclusions between the two governments and the technical partners, the Save Sugar Company was incorporated in July, 1975 with the sum of 30 million Dollars: Benin 49%, Nigeria 46% and the technical partners 6%. The company was administered by a Board of Directors which composed of members from Nigeria, Benin and the representative of the Technical partners (Adeyemi, 1991).

The second company jointly owned by Nigeria and Benin is the Onigbolo Cement Company, the contract which became effective in August, 1979. The parties to the company are Benin Republic 51%. The Republic of Nigeria 43%, the technical partners 5%. The company is also administered by a Board of Directors which is made up Benin, Nigerians and representatives of the technical partners (Adeyemi, 1991).

Also, in 1988, the two countries made move to privatise the sugar company as a result of poor management which makes it difficult for them to profit from the company. In line with the spirit of privatization the management of the company was transferred to Chief Obasanjo and Mr. Codjia of Benin Republic to facilitate the privatization, process (Punch, 30, November, 1988). In 2002, effort was also made by the two countries to establish a joint chamber of commerce. This was with a view to formalise trade relations between the two countries as the trade between the two countries has been informal without any proper record. (*Nigerian Tribune* 10/4/2002). Also, in 2007, Nigeria, Benin and Togo signed memoranda of understanding on economic integration of the three countries to facilitate the economic development of the three countries which shared many things in common before separation by colonial boundary (*Thisday*, 9/2/2007). All these pointed to the fact that even after creation of the artificial colonial boundary separating the people, the people and government of the two countries have always demonstrated effort towards economic integration of the two countries and the sub-region in general.

Nigeria has always been compassionate in issues of economic relations with her neighbouring Benin Republic. For instance, in 2005, the Federal Government of Nigeria lifted ban on Benin goods. This was due to the fact that the ban affected not only the Benin Republic's budget but even ongoing capital projects were stopped. The two countries then established a joint committee on commerce to be monitoring the good influx from the two countries (*Thisday*, 31/5/2005). In spirit of good neighbourliness and forge stronger economic ties, Nigeria and Benin organised economic forum in 2007 where business men and women of the two countries interact. The objectives were the reinforcement of business relations between the two countries and presentation of opportunities offered in various sectors, such as tourism. Agriculture, electricity, communication and petroleum (*Guardian*, 12/2/2007). Also

important is that, Nigeria has over the years extended financial assistance to Benin Republic especially during difficult times such as floods in 1982, in 1972 Nigeria granted N2,000,000 interest free loan repayable in 25 years to Benin, in 1989 Nigeria grant gift of \$2,5000:00 to pay outstanding workers' salaries (Dahiru, 2003). In a nutshell, the economy of Benin is tied to Nigeria. Smuggling across Nigeria – Benin border is the second-largest foreign earners for Benin (Asobele, 2003).

From the above stated fact, Nigeria and Benin enjoy good economic relations. Nigeria however, bears the heavier burden of making such relations because of her advantage in resources.

Problem Areas between Nigeria and Benin Republic

In any relationship either between persons or states is bound to encounter problem one way or the other in a bid to promote their collective welfare.

No relationship between two nations is completely without strains or possibilities of conflict and misunderstanding strains and conflict or possibility of conflicts are bound to occur whether on a minor scale requiring little diplomatic efforts to resolve or on a grand scale leading to military confrontation (Mungadi, 2001: Cited in Liman, 2010).

Based on the above statement it is worthy of note that despite the fact that Nigeria and Benin Republic enjoy relatively cordial relations and treats one another with high level of maturity, that did not suggest lack of conflict. There are indeed problems; such problems include the expulsion of aliens from Nigeria in 1983 and 1984 which affected many citizens of Benin in a bid to prevent illegal trafficking in currency during the change of naira. (Dahiru, 2003).

Another strain in Nigerians relations with Benin was President Zinsus collaboration with the international committee of Red Cross (ICRC) to use Cotonu Airport and seaport as transits or staging posts for aircraft relief materials to Biafra secessionists (1967-70). Nigeria saw this action as support for Biafra (Dahiru, 2003). It is however, impossible to discuss the problem areas between Nigeria and Benin Republic without bringing to the fore, the problem of smuggling of goods from Nigeria which led to the closure of the border. This, according to Nigeria, caused damage to the economy and threatened people's lives, property investment and Benin government was not cooperative in addressing the problem (*Daily Champion* 18-8-2003).

Nigeria in fact, made a firm statement that Benin Republic should stand to be counted as friend and brother or fall and be swept away as a foe and villain. It is estimated that over 2000 cars were snatched between 2001 and 2003 and freely driven across the border to Benin Republic. And in most cases, public officials and security personnel were said to be riding some of the snatched cars. Also, half of the robbers operated in

the entire south-west up to Benin city, Edo state came from Benin Republic (Daily Champion, 22/8/03).

Related to the above was the deliberate dumping of goods in Nigeria with its far-reaching implications to local industry. Despite the government's ban of these luxury products to encourage use of local substitutes or promote production of local industries, Benin Republic made this effort a futility by encouraging or tolerating smuggling and dumping of these banned goods into Nigeria. It is also the route used for the smuggling of crude oil and other oil products from Nigeria thereby creating hardships on Nigerians as well causing hardship on the country (*Daily Champions* 22, August, 2003).

Another problem area in Nigeria – Benin relations is the illegal detention of Nigerians by Benin security agents. For instance, on 11, October, 1999 about 40 Nigerians business men were detained by Benin security agents for allegedly entering the country without valid documents. This is against chapter IV, Article 27 (1) of the (ECOWAS) protocol on freedom of movement and residence. It is also a common thing for Benin police to hold Nigerians suspects without trial and subject them to torture and humiliation (Daily times 11, October, 1999). In 2001 a Nigerian University lecturer was killed in Benin by the police while driving home (Sunday Punch 2/2/2001). Also, in October 1996, four officials of the Department of Customs and Excise were unduly detained in Benin Republic. The Government had to intervene at diplomatic level. In March, 1987, four Nigerians including an Octogonian and baby were killed following clashes between Nigerians at Glazone in the Republic of Benin. In March, 1981 troops from Benin Republic were reported to have occupied Nigerian village in Sokoto state, particular in the district of Illo. The troops did not only forcefully collect taxes but also refused Alhaji Shehu Kangiwa, the then Governor of Sokoto state, entry into the villages (*This Day* 11, October, 1997).

Deportation of Nigerians by Benin authority is common. For instance, in September, 1996 more than 2000 Nigerians were deported from Benin Republic. They were said to be illegal residents. This action negates ECOWAS protocol signed by both Nigeria and Benin Republic which provide for freedom of movement and resident permit without any document for 90 days, (*Thisday*, 11/10/1999). Recently, in 1999, 2000 Nigerians were deported from Benin Republic and their properties destroyed after over five decades of peaceful co-existence and this was despite the fact that the people share same language and religion, (*Guardian*, 23, October, 1999).

This section could not be concluded without bringing to the fore, the role of France. All Nigerians immediate neighbours are francophone states and are still well connected to their ex-colonial master France for instance has a special ministry that caters for her ex-colonies. Besides, it supports them with grants, cultural and technical assistance etc. France however sees Nigeria as a threat to her hegemony in Africa and especially West Africa, (Ekoko, 2004).

Another fact is that both Nigerian and French foreign policies are centred on Africa. France has for a very long time fears the dominance and influence of Nigeria over her immediate neighbours who are francophone states. The fear of France over Nigeria was not an abstraction; the population of Nigeria (50 percent of West African Population) and its abundance material resources are seen by France as capable of exerting influence on her neighbour and the region at large (Ekoko,2004). France supported Biafra with different military arsenals to fight Nigeria. it was reported that French army dispatched several arms and ammunition to Biafra to fight Nigeria. This was carried out via Garbon, a former French territory. In fact, when in early 1961 Nigeria banned French aircraft and ships from its territories, Benin was adversely affected. It depended on the Lagos port for the construction of the Cotonou harbour, (Dahiru, 2003). Despite the above problems, Nigeria and Benin Republic continued to enjoy relatively warm relationship.

Conclusions

From the foregone discussion, the paper attempted to point to the historical, socio-cultural, and economic and the problems areas between the federal republic of Nigeria and Benin republic as the basis of enhancing our understanding of historical perspectives of the relations between the contiguous West Africa countries which colonial boundary separated and divided into different sovereign states. The paper also demonstrated that, the two states were economically, politically and socio-culturally inter-connected and supportive to each other even before colonialism. This however does not explain the absence of hitches between the two states; rather it explains the high level of mutual understanding and cooperation between them. Nigeria however, due to her resources bear greater burden of maintaining the relationship.

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